

William C. Rhoden, *New York Times*

When Rep. Betty McCollum, Democrat of Minnesota, decided to take on Nascar last month, she did not know until midnight what she was getting into. All she knew was that everyone was being asked to make deep budget cuts and sacrifices and the Department of Defense said that it had no fat to cut.

McCollum said that she saw fat in the military's support of motor sports, specifically Nascar, and wanted to end its sponsorship of race teams.

So McCollum, in her sixth term and a member of the House Appropriations and Budget committees, offered an amendment to the House budget bill to end the military's sponsorships.

"I have nothing against Nascar," McCollum said Thursday in a phone interview. "The Defense Department said it didn't have anything that could be cut. Seven million dollars to sponsor a car and we're cutting cops, we're cutting teachers, we're cutting programs for homeless vets?"

Her argument seemed solid. She pointed out that the Army, the Air Force and the National Guard spend millions of dollars on sponsorship - \$100 million over the past 10 years.

McCollum's amendment sought to prohibit taxpayer funds from being used for sponsorship of racecars, dragsters, Indy cars and motorcycle racing. She also wanted to repeal the \$45 million special tax earmark for Nascar and race track owners included in the 2010 law that extended the Bush tax cuts.

She knew that Nascar was popular but had no idea how popular. She received hate mail, including a fax in her office laced with obscenities. She said she was approached by colleagues from both parties trying to discourage her from introducing the bill.

"I had about six members on my side of the aisle and 12 on the other side of the aisle say, 'Can you make that thing go away? You're right, we should cut it, but I don't want to take the heat for it.' "

"Everybody here is making tough choices," she said. "What is it about Nascar as a special interest that we can't even have an open discussion on the priorities?"

Alas, the amendment was defeated on Friday, 281-148.

Armed forces officials say the sponsorship helps recruiting, though the Navy and the Marines Corps have pulled out of the Nascar sponsorship business - precisely because they could not gauge the effectiveness of their campaigns on recruiting.

McCollum learned the issue goes beyond the track, and even common sense. Military sponsorship of race cars is wrongheaded, especially at a time when deep cuts are being made in life-and-death areas.

On the other hand, there is a special bond between sports and the military. We sing the National Anthem before sports events and thunderous military flyovers are a staple of big events. There is an even closer relationship, apparently, between motorsports - in this case Nascar - and the military.

Those who have volunteered to serve need their spirits lifted, and sports is one of the triggers used to lift them. If watching cars bearing military logos helps, so be it.

The thorny issue is who pays for the boost.

Taxpayers, of course. "Sports is a big business and a lot of these athletes are making top dollar," McCollum said. "A lot of people who own the sports teams, they're making a lot of money. Are they wrapping themselves in the flag and the taxpayers don't know that they're footing the bill for it?"

On Sunday three cars in the Daytona 500 will be sponsored by the military. The National Guard sponsors Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s team, the Army sponsors Ryan Newman for \$7.4 million a year, and the Air Force sponsors A. J. Allmendinger for less than \$2 million.

If this is a patriotic issue, then why doesn't Nascar have its drivers donate space on their cars to the military?

Ramsey Poston, the managing director of Nascar corporate communications, said the sponsorships were not a Nascar issue.

Unlike in the N.F.L., Nascar drivers and teams are independent contractors. Nascar controls its logo and the rulebook and determines where and when races will be held.

"Nascar doesn't charge anyone for sponsorships," Poston said. "We don't own any cars; we don't own drivers."

McCollum wasn't around for the final vote - she left for Yemen late Thursday evening on a fact-finding mission. But she had a sense that her amendment was doomed.

"I hope its passes but I don't think it will," she said. "A lot of people just don't want the hassle. We're not talking about prohibiting Nascar from using big events to recruit. But \$7 million for a car?"

A powerful race car lobby says yes.